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TAGS: PREL PGOV EI UK
SUBJECT: NIO SAYS PAISLEY'S RESIGNATION WON'T DESTABILIZE
NORTHERN IRELAND

REF: BELFAST 0036

Classified By: Political Counselor Rick Mills for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C/NF) Political Advisors in the British Government's Northern Ireland Office told the Embassy March 5 that the NIO, "broadly speaking, doesn't think Paisley's resignation will be destabilizing." Poloff spoke with the Northern Ireland Office's Katy Petaffe and John Todd. Todd confirmed that Paisley's resignation was not unexpected, given that Paisley, Jr. had been forced from office earlier in the year.

It would be up to the DUP to pick its new leader, said Todd.

Both Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds were names being considered for the leadership, according to Todd, with many suggesting Robinson may become the successor in a "Blair to Brown-type" deal. Todd said the choice was up to the DUP; the NIO was uninvolved and agnostic as to who should lead the party. He noted that the choice for First Minister was not necessarily the same as that of leader of the party, although the NIO expected that the individual selected to lead the party would also fill the role of First Minister. Todd said Sinn Fein would have to re-nominate McGuinness once the DUP elects its next First Minister.

¶2. (C/NF) Poloff asked whether Paisley's resignation risked any lapse in the standing of a legitimate devolved Joint Government. Todd said "no," as there is sufficient time between Paisley's announcement that he will resign and May, when his replacement must be selected. Adding the caveat that, "in Northern Ireland politics is never certain," Todd said HMG was optimistic about the transition to a reconstituted Joint Government. He speculated that Paisley could step down one day and a new Joint Government could be convoked the following day.

Impact on Investment Conference

¶3. (C/NF) Poloff noted that Paisley has been quoted in the March 5, The Times as saying he based his leave-date around the Investment Conference. Todd confirmed that Paisley would view his participation in the Investment Conference as his swan song and added that he thought Dodds and Robinson would be participating in their current capacities. Poloff asked how Todd and the NIO assess the announcement vis a vis its effect on the Conference, which the USG has seen as a means to solidify the peace in Northern Ireland and in which it has expended much interest, time and political capital. Todd said Paisley's announcement could be viewed as positive, in that it may stimulate interest in the Conference, as invitees may consider their participation as their only chance to watch a historically-important political figure in Northern

Ireland make his final, grand gesture.

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